

**Dispatching in Slippers: The Future of Public Safety
Communication Centers?**

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

Dispatching in Slippers: The Future of Public Safety Communication Centers?

The room starts to shake and roll while Pat sits in his recliner waiting for the 5:00 news to come on. Having been a California resident for his entire life, he quickly realizes that this is no little tremor; instead, it is a significant earthquake. He watches intently as a message of the Emergency Broadcast System streams across his television. The information coming across the squiggly lines of his plasma screen indicates there has been significant damage sustained to the infrastructure of his community, and that fires are beginning to rage out of control due to ruptured gas lines. Pat has been a Public Safety Dispatcher for his community's police department for more than ten years; he is aware the sooner he can get to work, the better chance people have to stay alive. Pat tells his family that he is needed at work and moves hurriedly towards the study in his house. With the flip of a few switches, along with several keystrokes on his computer, Pat's phone begins to ring. Pat calmly answers, "9-1-1, what is your emergency?" Just that quickly, Pat is "at work" and begins helping in a time of crisis.

The "Anytown" Police Department took a page from the private sector and had taken advantage of having employees working from home. They realized that the role of the Public Safety Dispatcher has evolved from being just a job for a clerk to answer the phone and radio. Their roles are now that of highly skilled professionals who fill a unique niche that few can replace. Public Safety Dispatchers are employed in one of the most stressful jobs in the nation, yet they had been traditionally relegated to working environments that provide little or no opportunities to escape the work setting. But Pat and his fellow Anytown dispatchers had phones routed to their homes, along with all of the computer equipment required to perform their dispatching duties. By taking a

calculated risk, the Anytown Police Department was now able to reap the benefits of their decision and their Public Safety Dispatchers were able to quickly respond to a critical situation without stepping foot outside their homes.

Life as we know it

Associated Press writer Heather Greenfield (2005) noted that telecommuting has a higher priority in our post-September 11 era than just reducing traffic and pollution. It is a way to save lives. Keeping the government working in times of a natural disaster or one precipitated by man is of utmost importance. The public often relies on Public Safety Dispatcher in time of personal crisis. When there is a calm voice on the other side of the phone, that is all a person needs to remain calm in the face of disaster. Callers don't ask whether that person is in a uniform sitting in a Communication Center located inside a government building, or in a room in their residence wearing fuzzy slippers, as long as the end result is keeping citizens safe and alive.

While their roles have changed, Public Safety Communication Centers generally continue to be located within a single department or an off-site multi-agency center. According to Kathryn Nielsen-Ruble (personal communication, April 7, 2010), who worked as a Public Safety Communications Dispatcher and Supervisor for over 40 years, two of the greatest on-going concerns faced by any Public Safety agency are fiscal and personnel concerns. Life within a Public Safety Communication Center is a microcosm of this. Short tempers created by long hours and the seemingly never-ending calls for service from citizens and officers create an environment ripe for complaints. The on-going stress often leads to dispatchers frequently taking time off, which often results in excessive overtime costs.

Public Safety Command Staff members have recognized these problems over the past decades, but little has changed with regard to the setting within which dispatchers perform their duties. All too often, the burden falls to supervisors who oversee the Communication Centers to find answers and resolutions to the stress, discomfort and interpersonal issues of the workplace. Unfortunately, answers traditionally revolve around trying to correct behaviors through training or discipline, rather than attempting to dig deeper and identify problems.

Placing these strong personalities within a confined workspace, where dispatchers have little chance to escape the non-stop calls for service from both their staff and the public is a recipe for frustration. Yet Public Safety Administrators continue to place their Dispatchers within these work environments. Nielsen-Ruble (personal communication, April 7, 2010) worked for both a large municipal police department as well as a large state law enforcement agency in California during her career and had the pleasure to experience numerous advancements in the Public Safety Communications profession. However, she shared that she had always been amazed to hear the bewilderment of many Administrators she worked for who experienced common issues in their Communication Centers; all revolving around personnel or fiscal issues. Perhaps Albert Einstein had Public Safety Communication Centers in mind when he coined the definition of insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” The means by which a number of organizations outside policing perform dispatch duties may hold answers we have not yet considered.

Life in the rest of the world

Off-site call centers have proven to be effective in the private sector, providing employees an opportunity to work from their homes. As a result of advanced technology over the past two decades, high-speed movement of information has made virtual meetings and the outsourcing of call centers a reality. Both have proven to be a reliable and cost-effective alternative for many businesses within the private sector. Virtual communications has enabled the outsourcing of jobs to off-site locations, resulting in flexibility and a reduction in overall costs. The concept of outsourcing is not new; in fact, it has been a reality since the 1980's. Rather than sending jobs abroad, though, they are moved to a "homesourcing" or "homeshoring" format.

The best known example of homesourcing is the success of JetBlue Airlines. They have successfully utilized stay-at-home moms as call-takers since 2002. JetBlue's founder, David Neeleman, began homesourcing at Morris Air, an airline he founded and headed before selling it to Southwest Airlines in 1993. When Neeleman began his next airline, he decided to have the reservation system be completely based at home. It was this philosophy that has guided the firm's reservation system ever since (Friedman, 2005). Homesourcing has also proven an effective alternative for other companies as well. Office Depot, McKesson and J. Crew have all been using the concept with success since early 2000. For those companies, homesourcing reduces the risk of accent fatigue, cultural disconnection and customer rage that can occur with outsourcing ("Call Centers In The Rec Room," 2006).

Homesourcing Can Make the World Better

There are definite advantages for businesses, including Public Safety, to utilize the homesourcing concept. In their article in The American Economic Review, Feenstra and Hanson (1996) stated that homesourcing tends to make workers happier and as a result more productive. This productivity provides advantages in the form of greater efficiency and lower costs. Part of the reason for this high level of productivity is that homesourced employees on average tend to be more educated than their peers.

Industry-wide, seventy-five percent of homesourced agents have some college education versus 20% of Call Center employees. The data shows an increase in sales up to 25% higher than in Call Centers and customer satisfaction rates are often 40% better as well. JetBlue's happy workers have resulted in a 3.5% turnover rate in a field that normally has an industry average of 65%. This reduced turnover rate directly translates to a financial savings for JetBlue when turnover costs amount to about 30% of an employee's salary; the retention rates have a significant impact on the bottom line (Keating, 2005).

Another of the cost advantages of homesourced labor is that capital expenses for offices, parking lots, cafeterias, and other employee amenities are eliminated since employees work out of their homes. In 2005, it was estimated that JetBlue was saving around \$2000 dollars in rent costs per call agent per year by homesourcing its operations (Keating, 2005). For a mid-size Public Safety agency, these savings could equate to funding for added dispatcher's positions or similar enhancements in service without adding a dime to the department budget.

Homesourcing creates an opportunity for businesses to tap in to a workforce that may not have the opportunity to be utilized in conventional workplaces. Stay-at-home mothers and retirees, like those utilized by JetBlue, are but only one example of this under-utilized workforce. As is pointed out in a BusinessWeek article, for only a fraction of the cost, companies can get superior labor from a labor pool that, pre-broadband, was marooned from Big Business (“Call Centers In The Rec Room,” 2006). In addition to the stay-at-home moms, the labor pool includes itinerant military spouses, seasoned retirees living half the year down south, computer-savvy students, and disabled veterans [persons].

Employees also have advantages to homesourcing. Flexibility is a recurring theme shared by those who work from their homes. Shifts that allow workers to work around the needs they face on a daily basis, time to attend to their family needs or school-work are but a few of the non-monetary advantages shared by these employees. Homesourced employees also share advantages that keep their hard-earned money in their pocketbooks. The lack of need to commute to work saves money for fuel and maintenance on their vehicles, costs of eating lunch out every day and stress of being stuck in daily traffic congestion. Additionally, workers don’t have to worry about the cost of either maintaining uniforms or continually updating their wardrobe, since they don’t have face-to-face contact with either the public or their co-workers.

Since they are working from their homes, homesourced employees have an added benefit of the ability to write-off the equipment and services they purchase for their jobs. These tax breaks range from phone/Internet service, chairs, desks, computers, printers

and office supplies as deductible expenses. Other expenses may include mortgage interest, insurance, utilities, repairs and depreciation (IRS Website, 2010).

The Drawbacks of Homesourcing

Obviously, homesourcing is not without its concerns or drawbacks for both the employer and well as their employees. Some of the biggest fears that management faces in homesourcing any of its services are that of a loss of control and mistrust of employees by managers (Gordon, 1995). Some managers fear that homesourced employees may become more preoccupied with their home life than with performing the duties required for their jobs. This is harder still for a manager or supervisor who has only known how to supervise employees in a direct manner.

Another example of mistrust managers and supervisors will also face is fear of employees “shirking,” the act of avoiding work while on the job (difficult when a manager and an employee are in the same office). The management of potential shirking is significantly more difficult for the manager of a homesourced workforce. JetBlue has turned to Microeconomic theory to find its solution. To address the potential of shirking, JetBlue offers its employees a wage greater than the industry average along with generous benefit packages, to ensure that its largely unmonitored workforce will not shirk on the firm’s time. Initially Public Safety Administrators may balk at higher wages than what is currently the norm for dispatchers, but they need to compute long-term cost savings to understand its significant benefit. When employers factor in the savings in overhead, reduction in turnover rate and increased productivity of homesourced employees, the investment in this new breed of dispatcher will pay off in the long run.

Tracy (California) Police Department Captain John Espinoza (personal communication, April 7, 2010) and Electrical Engineer Mitch Okafuji (personal communication, April 7, 2010) both acknowledged that another major concern for Public Safety Administrators and IT Managers has been the security issues that could arise by having remotes dispatching sites. Fear of unauthorized access to sensitive information, systems being “crashed” by remote sites and potential terrorist infiltration are but a few of the issues raised. However, the age-old concerns over the security needed at remote sites can now easily be addressed using current biometric technology. Imagine where similar technology will take us in the future. The use of “cloud” technology, where data and programs are stored remotely and delivered through internet providers, can now make homesourced computer terminals “dumb”, coupled with proper policies and training, security concerns can be easily mitigated.

A New World for Public Safety?

Homesourcing Communication Centers can work for Public Safety, but will require the proper training of both management and line-level employees. The training needed will have to include non-traditional topics such as working and supervising in satellite work stations. Reinforcement by representatives of Human Resource departments of the ethics policy and workforce expectations will need to be emphasized, since the workers will be under less supervision than in traditional Communication Centers. Additionally, supervisors and managers will have to ensure that the appropriate and consistent monitoring of work productivity is done on a daily basis. However, for some managers and supervisors, the willingness to adopt and change their styles could remain an issue.

To date, Public Safety has not been able to take advantage of this opportunity for their Communication Centers; largely due to legal, personnel, and technology concerns and restrictions. For “virtual” Communication Centers to become a reality, it will take the combined efforts of employee associations (unions), Human Resource and IT departments to work diligently in their respective areas. Working in an orchestrated effort, the creation of these centers can become a new, effective and efficient resource for Public Safety.

Conclusion

Virtual communication has become a reality in today’s society and technology continues to grow at a rapid pace. If Moore’s Law holds true, then over the next ten years, the advancement in technology should create a working environment where large portions of companies will no longer have a need to meet at a central location in order to accomplish their jobs; since the work will be able to be access from any computer terminal. Coupled with the history of businesses proving time and time again that homesourcing is not only successful for their employees, but also cost effective, the concept of Public Safety utilizing “virtual” Communication Centers is clearly an option agencies want to consider now that technology, budgets and a changing workforce offer a chance for it to succeed.

Agencies across the nation have and will continue to look for ways to modify services in order to save monies within their ever-dwindling budgets. Threats of the next major terrorist attack are becoming a way of life for both citizens and Public Safety agencies. Combined with the seemingly non-stop advancement of technology, virtual Communication Centers are a logical step for Public Safety Leaders to pursue. However,

because Public Safety agencies are often steeped in a traditional mindset where change comes at a snail's pace, that step will indeed turn out to be a giant leap.

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